

THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

Opening Keynote Address – LCI 2010

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Well, I don't mind telling you that it was a bitter-sweet Easter at the Anderson house two weeks ago. Our youngest daughter, Katie, was home from college. Katie will be 20 this summer. While she was home this time, she sat down with me and Lydia, and began going over some of her dreams for the future. She talked about her job away this summer in Colorado – she'll be gone on her 20th birthday. She talked about returning to Baylor in the fall for the last half of her college career there. She talked about going into speech pathology, about going to graduate school after Baylor, about setting up her own private practice after that.

We could not be more thrilled for Katie or more proud of her. This time of life for many people is the trip of a lifetime.

But as any parent who has gone down this road will tell you, you do not come to this moment without deep questions. For all intents and purposes my youngest has left home. That was the reality of Easter. She really is, in a sense, leaving us forever, and I have deep questions. Questions like, "How in the world am I going to pay for graduate school?" Maybe that isn't a deep question as much as a deep-pockets question. Questions like, "What do we do if she gets homesick?" Or how about, "What do I do when Mom and Dad here get Katie-sick?"

I have deep questions, like "Will she be safe? Who will be there for her when I am not?" I understand that is the universal deep question for dads with their daughters.

But of all my deep questions, there is one that already keeps me up at night. And that question is, "Have I taught her everything she needs to know?" Have I taught her everything that she can learn only from this family? I can look back and see the fun and family times we have enjoyed with her. There's no doubt we've loved Katie and that she has loved us. It's always seemed like her days with us would go on forever.

But now she's 20 and there's a new season in her life and in ours...and there's a different urgency. The calendar turns, and a new season moves her beyond my care and keeping. And all those memories don't necessarily answer the question – have I prepared her for life beyond this family? I cannot love this child at this moment without that deep question.

You know raising up a disciple of Jesus has much of the same dynamic involved in it. Even in the church, there inevitably comes a time when our even or most-tenured and most-loved ones move beyond our care and keeping – it's just that some move to another community, some move to another congregation, and eventually all move to another Kingdom...the Kingdom of God. And the question lingers like that of a parent – did we prepare them for life beyond this family? Beyond our unquestioned affection for them, did we also have an unquestioned urgency for them, to instill something precious that they deserved to learn from us?

Here at University, we have come to frame that question this way: *If we know we will only have a person or a family for five years, what lessons are so important to build into their souls that if they should leave us without them, we would have failed them?* If we know we will only have a person or a family for five years – that's just about the time an average U.S. family stays in one community – what lessons are so important to build into their souls that if they should leave us without them, we would have failed them?

Let me pause here for just a moment. How would you answer that question for your congregation? If we passed a microphone around this morning, what would your answer be? Does your congregation have an answer? If so, are you satisfied with it, and are you really following it? If your church only had a person for five years, what lessons are so important to build into their souls that if they left home without them, you would have failed them?

You see, our congregations have only so much opportunity to instill something precious into their hearts. What are we doing to insure that happens? If that question doesn't raise in you a sense of urgency, then maybe we've not made it clear enough what is at stake.

But what we've learned here at University is it is that sense of urgency that gives us focus. Each day the calendar turns a page, and if we are going to raise up a child of God, then we have to sharpen our aim. We have to make some choices. We don't try to do everything, we try to do the right thing – we say, “This is what finally counts, and this is where we take our stand.”

So in this first keynote address, we want share with you what finally counts for our team, and where we are persuaded to take our stand. Over the past several years at University, we have developed and implemented what we call THE PATHWAY TO DISCIPLESHIP. “The Pathway to Discipleship.” The Pathway is our intentional “vision map” for deliberately taking people on a journey with Jesus. How do we help people look to Jesus and look like Jesus? That's how we here at University talk about disciple-making: helping people look to Jesus and look like Jesus. And we believe that task take a journey, a pathway, the trip of a lifetime. So we have come up with a pathway that we believe is based in scripture models and in Methodist theology. In other words, you might say that we have looked to Jesus to come up with a pathway that looks like Jesus.

And here we want to pause just a moment with a caveat. And the caveat is this: we are not saying that this model is the model. We certainly aren't saying that this model should be your model. What we do want to say is this: disciple-making deserves a model. Going “fail-safe” with those whom God has entrusted with you requires some kind of system, some kind of map, some kind of plan. We want to show you a model that we have found effective in our context – we want to show you what it is and how it came to be.

And it may be that this model works for you. It may well be that it does not. The best method of all is one that you will actually use. But one hope for this LCI Conference is that you will leave here Thursday either with a disciple-making plan, or at least the plan for making a disciple-making plan. Because some kind of process or map going to be central to any forward progress in your congregation.

A woman once said to the evangelist D. L. Moody, “I don't like the way you do that.” Moody answered, “Neither do I. How do you do it?” She said, “Well, I don't.” Moody said, “I like the way I'm doing it a whole lot more than the way you're not.”

That's kind of the tact we're taking this morning. If what we show you is not the way your congregation can best help people look to Jesus and look like Jesus, then what is?

So let's take a tour down The Pathway to Discipleship. And to better help you travel the Pathway, I want to read the gospel story that became the model for our Vision Map. You know the model as “The Walk to Emmaus” - Luke 24:13-35.

Well, what if the Walk to Emmaus is really a Pathway to Discipleship? Perhaps this memory of Easter is actually a model for Church. Maybe there are phases of that journey which mark stages in the life of a disciple. That's was the starting point for our Pathway to Discipleship at University. And from that starting point come three questions that govern our

church's journey to Jesus. And we believe that if we asked these three questions every day of every member, every program, every idea, every class, we'd begin to see God work in a powerful way. We believe these three questions can set you and me on the trip of a lifetime.

So, here are the questions.

First question: "What is my need for Jesus and what do I do about it?" Phase One on the Pathway of Discipleship is about helping people ask "What is my need for Jesus Christ and what do I do about it?"

You remember the story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus. It's after Easter, and two disciples are on their way to Emmaus. And Jesus meets them on the road. They experience Jesus by their side.

Now, what would it mean if people left your worship services every Sunday and said, "That United Methodist Church is where I experience Jesus by my side"?

You see, we believe every disciple starts with a Jesus meeting. Every Christian begins with a Jesus meeting. When God poured himself into the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, it was God's promise that each and every one of us could have a personal encounter with all that God is and with all God has in store for us. And one of the hallmarks of Methodist Christianity has always been the twin beliefs of experience and assurance. Experience and assurance – that someone who casts their future with Jesus can actually experience his presence and actually know that they have encountered the living God.

Now, how are you enabling that? How does your congregation help people discover their relationship with Jesus? How do you make the presence of the living God so real that people recognize their need for Jesus Christ and want to act on that?

For instance, do you ever expect something supernatural to happen on Sunday morning here? Do you ever come to worship prepared for God to intervene during that hour? Does your congregation come together presuming that someone will have their identity and destiny turned inside out by a personal encounter with living Truth during this hour? And do you deliberately design our life together around the possibility?

People have a need for Jesus Christ – they have a need to discover that relationship. That's why we've branded the Meeting Phase with the light bulb logo – it represents that "aha moment" of when you discover someone who is so much more than simply "some one."

So Phase One of the Pathway to Discipleship takes people who are not disciples and moves them to become new disciples. Here the focus is on new believers – institutionally, you could say that this is where we birth our new prospects. So everything that we do at this phase focuses on what we call "meeting ministries." The options we offer at this point all work to enable a meeting with Jesus. That's why the first question of Christian urgency is: "What is my need for Jesus and what do I do about it?"

And here's the second question: What is the news about Jesus and what do I do about it?" The second phase on the Pathway of Discipleship is about helping people ask What is the news about Jesus and what do I do about it?

On the road to Emmaus, meeting Jesus was the beginning, but that wasn't enough. They have Jesus, but they don't understand what that means. And so what does Jesus do? Jesus teaches them. He explains the Bible to them. And you can see them come to know Jesus as they come to know about Him. They know Him only as they know about Him.

You see, we believe every disciple deserves the Jesus message. First the Jesus meeting, and then, second, the Jesus message. What do we do to help people learn the truths of grace? How do we specifically help people know about Jesus so that they can better know Jesus?

My wife, Lydia, and I met for the first time 30 years ago this coming May. The first time I ever saw her – 30 years ago. When I first saw Lydia 30 years ago, I knew three things – I liked her, I wanted to like her more, and I wanted her to like me.

But what I found out over the next three years of dating is that there is a thin line between romance and research. There is a thin line between what you know and how you feel. I knew her, but I did not yet know about her. What food did she like? What music? What movies did she like and what did she not? I could not love more if I did not first learn more.

Now why would that be different with Jesus? How does your congregation help people develop their relationship with Jesus? Not just discover that relationship, but develop it?

For instance, here at University, we believe that every person who walks through our doors ought to expect that they will master some fundamental knowledge while here. They should expect to learn the Bible, which is the book of Jesus. They should expect to learn prayer, which is the language of Jesus. And they should certainly expect to learn Christian community – the Church – which is the people of Jesus.

Well, how do you intentional help people develop their Jesus relationship? Phase Two of the Pathway to Discipleship takes people who are new disciples and move them to become true disciples. Institutionally, you could say that the focus here is on new members, that this is where we birth our new supporters. But the journey from “new” to “true” only happens as people are immersed in the message of Jesus. That’s why all the options in the Phase Two are designed to instill the meaning of Jesus. That’s why we’ve branded the Message Phase with the open Bible logo. And that’s why the second question of Christian urgency is: “What is the news about Jesus and what do I do about it?”

And here’s the final question: “What is my call from Jesus and what do I do about it?” The third phase on the Pathway of Discipleship is about helping people ask, “What is my call from Jesus and what do I do about it?”

We go back to Emmaus one last time. Jesus first meets them, and then He teaches them. And then Jesus sends them. When they realize Who has been with them and what He has taught them, they run back to tell the others. They are literally the first Christian missionaries – they go to someone else and say, “We have seen the Lord.”

Now, how are we shaping our life together so that every man, every woman, every youth and child discovers how they can say, “We have seen the Lord?” Maybe not in those words...but what about with that excitement? What about with that same urgency?

You see, we believe every disciple has a Jesus mission. First the meeting, yes. Next the message, certainly. But ultimately the mission. Ultimately the calling. We may have music and praise that warms the heart. But if that good feeling does not compassionately send us to someone...then it may be art, it may be fun. But it is not the church of Jesus Christ. We can have the best Bible studies in town. We can have studies and small groups going 24-7. But if those groups don’t send themselves out with the message they have learned, then we might be nice book clubs or support groups. But we are not the church of Jesus Christ.

We can have a powerful passion for service. We can enlist youth and adults and families for building homes for those who have none. We can practice a generosity toward the poor and needy that other congregations only dream about. We can push the boundaries of our comfort zone to intervene in the lives of those who have a different language or a different race, a different lifestyle, or a difference prison record from ours. But if our outreach does not carry with it a deliberate expectation of sharing Jesus, if it does not arise from a working, growing

knowledge of the Christian message, then it's a nice service project, it's a nice volunteer moment, it's a nice community improvement. But it is not the church of Jesus Christ.

First the need, yes. Next the news, absolutely. But finally the call. A major assumption of our Pathway to Discipleship is that God has an indispensable role for every person to play. You are a part of God's work in the world. Let me say that again – you are a part of God's work in the world, and something precious and beautiful will go undone without you.

So how does your congregation intentionally help people deploy their relationship with Jesus – not just discover it, not just develop it, but deploy it? This is the third or Mission Phase of our Pathway – we've branded it with the globe logo. Phase Three of the Pathway to Discipleship takes people who are true disciples and turn them into trained disciplers. True disciples to trained disciplers – institutionally, we'd say this is where we birth our new leaders. Theologically, we'd say this is where disciples become apostles. Here's where people go out from the church to the community and are so entrepreneurial for Christ that other people begin to meet Christ, and the Pathway starts all over again. That's why we have to constantly have people asking, "What is my call from Jesus and what do I do about it?"

Now, for myself, I could spend the rest of my ministry just asking those three questions. As the church, is it really too demanding to submit our ministry to a simple test that asks, "How does this show my need for Jesus or my news about Jesus or my call from Jesus and what to do about it?" What if we used the map to lead the congregation into a ministry environment that was SPIRIT-led, VISION-driven, STAFF-administered, BOARD-accountable, and LAITY-executed? Let me repeat that again: what if you used a Pathway of Discipleship to lead your congregation into a ministry environment that was SPIRIT-led, VISION-driven, STAFF-administered, BOARD-accountable, and LAITY-executed?

And not only that, but what if we used this map as a way not only to teach our congregation's about John Wesley's understanding of grace, but actually use Wesley's theology of grace as the primary structure on which make disciples?

I have no doubt that many of you have already been relating Wesley's stages of grace to their partner phases in the Pathway of Discipleship. No to New, New to True, True to Trained – moving from initial meeting to deepening message to active mission. That sounds a lot like prevenient grace to justifying grace to sanctifying grace. That seems to parallel much of what Mr. Wesley understood as the pilgrimage of discipleship. One of the things that really turns me on to the Pathway of Discipleship is how it is Methodist in theology. It presupposes a theology of sanctification and what Wesley refers to as "going on to perfection in love."

So what might happen not just to people but to our congregations themselves if the Pathway helped them live out of both our scriptural models and our Wesleyan heritage?

The first thing we discovered at University was that if we were going on a journey with Jesus, then we had better have some "lanes" if you will to travel in. To use one analogy, an Interstate 10 will take you from Florida to California if you stay on it; but it takes multiple lanes to make it work. Some lanes are for trucks and some lanes are prohibited from trucks. Some lanes work better for faster drivers, some for slower drivers. But multiple lanes mean more travels take the trip and complete the ride. That's what we want to do with the Pathway to Discipleship. Can we offer some lanes – some growth streams – that recognizes some diversity and provides some choice of travel while still maintaining the destination?

Another analogy that we often use around here is what we call "the peas and carrots theory." "Peas and carrots" goes like this: if a mother says to a child. You are required to eat your vegetable this evening, even if you don't like it or want it. If you don't eat it, you can go to

bed hungry;” what will happen? Well, the child will go to bed hungry, mom goes to bed mad, she doesn’t get what she wants, he doesn’t get what he needs, nobody wins.

So, the next night at supper, she says, “Tonight for dinner, do you want peas or carrots?” What’s happened?

Well, the choice is his, but the substance is hers. He has the option, but she has the expectation. And who wins? The answer is “yes.”

Well, we had to build a “peas and carrots” approach in our thinking. How do we require people to engage the Pathway to Discipleship? How do you say to new believers or new members (who might be old members), “You must do this?”

The answer is our “peas and carrots.” That is, we do not provide the expectation without also providing the options. We found that while we value growth, people value choice – they value choice or options. It’s our high expectations wedded to their wide diversity.

So, with that in mind, we went back to Luke’s Walk to Emmaus and asked, “How did Jesus disciple those disciples? Did Jesus use a one-size-fits-all approach, or did Jesus offer several streams of engagement? Did Jesus use multiple tools of which one or more might best fit a particular disciple?”

And from that study, we have come up with what we call “Three Streams of Required Options.” How’s that for an oxymoron – “Required Options.” But we have three “peas and carrots” to deliberately move people through each of the Pathway Phases. At the beginning of each stage – Meeting Phase, Message Phase, Mission Phase – at the beginning of each phase, a disciple chooses one particular pathway with a specific curriculum or event that is designed for that phase.

For instance, Growth Stream Number One is BIBLE STUDY. What did Jesus share with them on the Road to Emmaus? Well, he shared Bible Study with them – verse 27, “*Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*”

Apparently, Bible study was a primary tool for Jesus. That’s why the first growth stream on our Pathway to Discipleship is Bible Study. At the beginning of each Pathway Phase, a person can choose if they would like to take the Bible study especially designed or selected for the particular Phase. For instance, I don’t know what Bible studies you might create for your system, but we have a specific study for each phase. For the Meeting Phase, it’s “Jesus 101” – a six-week course on the life of Jesus Christ through the Gospel of John. For the Message Phase, it’s “New Testament Survey,” a ten-week Bible study that provides an overview of the entire New Testament. And for our Mission Phase, it’s “Coach’s Directed Study, “which is a one-on-one Bible study with one of our Coaching Pastors

Growth Stream Number Two is Small Group Classes. This Growth Stream imitates the experience of Jesus sharing discussion and relationship with a smaller and more intimate group. You recall this is not unusual in Luke’s gospel, where Jesus is often referred to as being with three or twelve, as opposed to the seventy or the crowd.

Well, our Small Group Growth Stream has options that vary in length and in style. What they all have in common is the opportunity to grow in relationship and learn through community. For our Meeting Phase, it’s “Alpha.” You are probably already familiar with Alpha, and we will have a workshop on it during LCI. For our Message Phase, it’s “Disciple Bible Study I.” Once again, I believe I can safely assume that you are already familiar with Disciple. And for our Mission Phase, it’s what we call “The Pastor’s Academy,” This is led by our Directing Pastor,

and focuses on the principles of spiritual leadership through intensive scripture reading and the study of outside sources.

By the way, notice if you will that we don't create everything on our own. Part of our strategy is to take proven, effective, well-tested material that is already a part of our United Methodist environment. The trick for us is to take that material and strategically place it within the Pathway, so that it accomplishes the purposes for which we intend. So, for instance, you see Alpha and Disciple Bible Study – good, proven, long-tenured stuff. What is particular to us is how we use them by where we use them.

Growth Stream Number Three is what we call Immersion Events. We think of Immersion Events are highly concentrated, thick-content events of short but very intensive duration – things like retreats, or mission trips, or “campaign” formats.

One of the really particular things about Luke's Walk to Emmaus is how intensive it was. It was very short term in length of time – not even an afternoon. But what it lacked in time it more than made up in focus. It was highly focused. It was a real deep engagement with Jesus. This was no “drop-in-drop-out” class – once you got on this road with Jesus, you were 100% in for the whole journey. And when you got to then end of this road, you had no doubt that you had really been somewhere different with someone special.

Well, we think of immersion events just that – events. They have an “event” feel about them. They are a happening, you “immerse” yourself in this happening, when they happen to you, you have no doubt that you've been somewhere different with someone special.

So when we talk about the Immersion Event Growth Stream, we are talking about three specific “happenings” in particular. For the Meeting Phase, it's “Jesus for Seekers & Skeptics,” and the title says it all. This weekend event is designed to share the reality and relevance of Jesus particularly with people who have serious questions about God, Christianity, and the Church.

Then, in the Message Phase, it's “The Forum.” The Forum is something real new, even for University. This is a unique opportunity to engage in reading scripture and discovering techniques for studying it through an online community. Think of it as “cyber seminary” in twelve fast-paced weeks.

And then, for the Mission Phase, it's United Methodism's “Walk to Emmaus.” Once again, notice: Emmaus is not particular at all to University. What is particular to University is the surrounding context. What is particular is how we use it in relation to two other options in one particular Phase.

But notice what's happened, at least here at University. One Pathway, three Growth Streams. Now we have a map-based approach for how we see reality and how we travel that reality together. Now, every program we do can be “located, diagnosed, and addressed” on this “map.” Not only that, but every prospective member we meet can be now “located, diagnosed, and addressed” on this “map.” And maybe even most exciting, at least to us, now every member can and should be “located, diagnosed, and addressed” on this “map.”

Not only that, but now we have a criteria for evaluating how we're doing. For instance, imagine for one moment that a University Church member moves away and joins another church in some other state. Now, suppose that church calls me and says, “You were so-and-so's pastor, so tell me – do you believe that this person is a disciple of Jesus Christ.” I say, “Yes, I am confident that they are a disciple.” And the caller says, “Based on what?”

Now, at your church, how would you answer the “Based on what?”

With the Pathway, I can say, “I cannot vouch for what’s in the depths of that person. But I can accurately tell you to what extent she took advantage of having a meeting with Jesus, learning the message of Jesus, and discovering her mission for Jesus.” I can locate her history within the Pathway and I can give a reading on where she is on the road.

Now, what in your system gives you the capacity to do that?

But maybe most engaging of all, the Pathway finally gives us a valid answer to that old question, “Why should I join your church?” “Why should I commit to this community of faith – why should I become a member of your church?”

Because what answers do we typically give to people, especially people who don’t particularly like being a member of anything anymore? What answers do we give them?

“Well, you can’t be an officer in the church unless you join.” *Okay, that’s one really good reason not to join in the first place.*

“Well, if you join the church, it shows you love Jesus.” *Well, I love my wife too, but I don’t have to join a Bunko Group to show it. I don’t see the necessity there.*

“Well, if you join the church, we’ve got all these neat groups and programs and volunteer work you can join.” *I’m not looking for any more reasons to be any more busy.*

“Join the church and get new friends.” *So? I have a Facebook account already. I’ve already been friended by 5378 of my closest personal e-buddies.*

“Join the church and every fall you can make a pledge to the budget.” *Yeah – there’s incentive.*

Why should I join your church?

With the Pathway to Discipleship, we discovered a new answer to that old question. And the answer goes like this:

“When you join University United Methodist Church, we take spiritual responsibility to do everything we can to help you look to Jesus and look like Jesus. When you join this church, it means you can count on us to intentionally introduce you to a meeting with Jesus, to the message of Jesus, and to your mission for Jesus. Your membership is actually your invitation for us to take you on a well-mapped, well-meaning journey with Jesus. Whatever else you experience while you are at University Church – choirs, youth trips, fellowship dinners, dear friendships, whatever – you can expect us to account for where you are and how you’re doing on the Pathway to Discipleship.”

Now, how about that for an invitation to Christian Discipleship and Local Church Membership?

Frankly, a good number of people say no to that invitation. A good number of people who have started to join University have said no once they heard that. They said no because they simply do not want that much or expect that much from a church. And some...some have been honest enough to say that they do not want that much or expect that much for themselves.

The thing is, those who say no now know WHY they are saying no. AND...those who say yes... NOW THEY know why they are saying yes. Every “no” we get is a worthy “no,” and every “yes” we get is a far more valid, far more committed, far more excited yes.

Now, hear us again. We are not necessarily saying that our Pathway of Discipleship is for your church. Your study of scripture and your knowledge of your community may well bring something more appropriate to the table. And we are not recommending that you take our Growth Streams or our Core Curriculum back home and staple them to your value system.

What we are trying to say is this. The task of every church is to make disciples and make decisions that make disciples. That's what we say around here all the time – we say that the task of a spiritual leader is to make disciples and make decisions that make disciples.

And one of the most important disciple-making decisions ahead of you is this: if not this Pathway, then *what* instead? If not these Growth Streams, then *how* instead? If you know you will only have a person for five years, what lessons are so important to build into their souls that if they should leave you without them, you will have failed them?

Some time back I received a note from a young person in our church. It was during “Red Ribbon Week” anti-drug program at her school. She wrote me of her frustration with the response of the adults and parents around her. She wrote, “*Parents in our neighborhoods are living in this fantasy that their kids don't do drugs or sex or drink. I really understood this when I attended the Red Ribbon Week kick-off. It made me really sad that there were more people in the band than watching. The problem is you can do all these DARE and Red Ribbon things but parents still pretend it's not a problem. I know of 4 girls at this moment that are over 3 months pregnant. I believe that the only way to get to the thick-headed parents is for you to do a sermon, as hard as it will be. I think it is the only way to fix this.*”

Now, what's she asking for? A tough sermon? Perhaps. What I think she's really asking for, though, is an urgent church. She's asking for a people who will bring to the table something more powerful than the apathy and denial and sheer human brokenness that she sees all around her.

As congregations of the United Methodist Church, I like to think that you and I have that “more powerful something.” You and I have the meeting, the message, the mission of Jesus Christ. And if you and I don't center our lives on those, then who else will?

So as we begin this week's LCI event, we want to invite you to step out on the road to Emmaus, a Pathway to Discipleship. At University, we believe that the Pathway is one way that God gains God's rightful sovereignty – God's true ownership – over a congregation. So our congregation is going down a new road with a new direction for with Jesus. I would like to think you might want to join us. This Pathway is not necessarily an easy road – it's a road that will challenge us to change: we're going to have to give up some things we value and we're going to have to risk some things we've not done before. It's not necessarily an easy road...

But it is a clear road, and it's a good road. It's the trip of a lifetime. And it's the one road that takes you to the one place worth going.